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Dancing on a Shifting Carpet: Reinventing traditional schooling for the 21st century

A review of Degenhardt, L. & Duignan, P. (2010) *Dancing on a Shifting Carpet: Reinventing traditional schooling for the 21st century* (Camberwell, Vic.: ACER Press), ISBN: 9780864318459.

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Everything about this book caught my eye! I was intrigued by the title, the dramatic shadow figures against a warm coloured background, wondering what this book had to do with education, and more specifically leadership in schools. Even more intriguing, there was the word ‘reinvent’ alongside ‘traditional schooling’ and so my appetite was whet. Like many breath taking novels, the significance of the title *Dancing on a Shifting Carpet* was hinted at part way through the text, but not revealed until the last pages where the authors disclose that it ‘aptly describes the flexibility, grace and balance necessary when everything seems to be changing at once, to say nothing of the artistry, passion and commitment also involved’ (p. 184). There is no doubt that the dancing skills of the principal (one of the authors) must surely have been refined throughout the lengthy period of leading her school through a transformational process of reinventing schooling.

The book presents an openness, a ‘warts and all’ honesty about the reality of this process spanning some six years of transforming an established, successful school to meet the needs of the 21st century students, and in particular, female students. As highlighted in the foreword by Robert J. Starratt, this is a well crafted story told by the authors ‘with scholarly perspectives that add depth to the narrative of the journey’ (p. iii). This aspect was no doubt strengthened by the principal’s role as researcher, documenting the process of school re-culturing for her doctoral studies. The case-study school is identified and the principal openly discusses her personal and professional journey in the dual roles of principal and researcher. The story carries many of the principal’s personal reflections, especially on her development of a particular style of leadership termed *contemplative-reflexive leadership*, based on reflexive interaction and reflected thought. This resulted in a model that is ‘respectful, relational, values-based, research-informed and action-oriented leadership for major change in a rapidly changing context’ (p. 170).

It is an action-packed story that has been presented in three parts – the *context for change*, the *case study of change* and *leading a continually reinventing school*. Each of these, although integral parts of the evolving story, might be studied as a separate piece with specific

focus for the reader in search of a particular perspective of reinventing schooling, whether it be specific models for meeting the needs of current and future students, a leadership model for adoption or advice for school and systemic policy makers, leaders, teachers and other community members. Excellent cross referencing of chapters can be traced within each of the three parts and a set of reflective questions is presented at the end of each chapter in parts 2 and 3. These questions invite the reader to reflect on their own context and consider the possibilities that have been presented in the chapter.

Flanked by an abundance of change management literature and as many efforts to change schools, this *reinvention* story was prompted by ‘a clarion call for substantive change in schooling and in schools’ (p. 3) from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The notion of reinventing initially seems radical and perhaps even unsettling for the ongoing running of an established school of creditable reputation. However, the authors emphasise the dogged intent to change paradigms of schooling in order to meet the needs of current and future generations of students, and to simultaneously reinvent new cultures of schooling. Throughout the book, the authors acknowledge the risks involved in this journey, proceeding without a blueprint and building mainly on the trust of the principal and her internal and external mentors. With this acknowledgement the final chapter clinches the possibility of a blueprint for those considering a similar venture with the practical advice presented in 12 key learnings as summarised by the authors. Perhaps the most significant is the first learning ‘The need for a why – moral purpose as a compelling reason for change’ which seems to underpin ‘a strong values base’, ‘the necessity for cultural change’, ‘the will and ‘grit’ to work through...’ (p. 172).

For all the excitement created throughout the book with the complex and emotional turbulence of re-culturing, I was also aware of the central role played by the principal in this change process and wondered whether the changes will last. Encouragement of and engagement of others in sharing leadership was discussed but what did not emerge as an explicit feature of the book was the notion that teachers as leaders may be integral to the success of sustainable school improvement (Crowther, Ferguson & Hann, 2009).

Reinventing schooling for the case study school of this book was undoubtedly a successful process and the book is replete with models presented for possible adoption and adaptation by other schools contemplating a similar transformation. However, the framework for reinventing a school presented as 12 steps (p. 43), albeit not intended to be followed in a linear fashion, does not necessarily offer the uninitiated a well supported process. What it does offer is a challenge to school leaders to have the courage to lead their schools in the ‘rapidly changing but very exciting environment of the 21st century’ (p. 1) and not to lose sight of the purpose of change – to reinvent their school so it better prepares young people for today’s world.

Reference

CROWTHER, F., FERGUSON, M. & HANN, L. (2009) *Developing Teacher Leaders*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press).